

Changing Seasons Part I: Guardian of the People

By Timothy Zahn

They came out of nowhere as Obi-Wan Kenobi flew his *Faraway*-class scout ship high above the wide expanse of checkered fields: three battle droids on STAPs, firing their twin blasters at him for all they were worth.

From the droid socket behind Obi-Wan, the scout's R3 unit gave a startled electronic yelp. "I see them," Obi-Wan soothed him, throwing power to the aft shields and wishing fleetingly he had his usual Aethersprite starfighter instead of a sensor-loaded spotter ship. Still, two years of warfare had taught him how to deal with STAPs, and the scout ought to have enough power to pull this off. "Hang on," he warned the droid and pulled back hard on the control bar.

The noise of blaster impacts cut off abruptly as he stood the scout on its tail and shot upward, leaving the STAPs far behind. Maneuverable though they were, the little droid carriers didn't have nearly the climbing capability to match a maneuver like this. Obi-Wan continued starward for another few seconds, then shoved the control bar forward, flipping the scout into a full-power dive.

It was a stunt he'd first seen Anakin pull several months ago, and he'd taken the brash young Padawan to task about it afterward. The younger man had countered with the unassailable logic that, first, he'd survived and, second, the trick had worked. Since then he'd used it at least three more times, with the same record of success.

Anakin would be highly amused if he ever found out Obi-Wan had tried it himself. Fortunately, Anakin was a dozen light-years away. Stretching out to the Force, Obi-Wan added power to the dive and closed in for the kill.

The droids saw him coming, of course. One of them leaned his STAP backward, trying to bring his blasters to bear on the ship screaming down on him from directly above, while the other two shot off in opposite directions as they tried to get out from under the dive.

But no defensive programming in the galaxy could compensate for the STAP's basic design limitations. The first droid wobbled violently, nearly toppling backward as its center of mass moved too far away from its antigravity projector. The other two, running now with their blasters pointed the wrong direction, were in equally fatal postures. And neither programming nor design could take into account the accuracy of a Jedi gunner with the Force as his ally. Three bursts from the scout's laser cannon, and the droids and their STAPs had disintegrated into flaming rubble.

Pulling back on the control rod, Obi-Wan leveled out again, wincing a little as he watched the smoking debris rain onto the ground below. From the large neat patches of stubble he could see all over the plain, it was clear the farmers were starting to bring in their crops, and chunks of twisted metal and plastic were not something their massive harvesting machines were designed to deal with. "At least we now know for sure that the Separatists have a base here," he commented to Arthree. Lifting his gaze from the ground below, he looked thoughtfully around the horizon.

It was about as unspectacular a landscape as he had ever seen. The farmland stretched as far north and south as he could see, squares of tan and brown and dark yellow dotted with widely scattered clusters of farm buildings. On the horizon to the west, a low ridge of gray mountains cut across the view, running north to south. Another, much closer set of cliffs rose along the east, paralleling the first range. A little ways to the southeast, the monotony of the second set of cliffs was broken by a gushing white-water river that emerged through a narrow gorge in the rock, washing violently into the valley and slowly calming as its banks widened and it turned toward the north. An intricate network of irrigation canals led away from the river, providing water for the entire valley. In the distance near the northern horizon, the towers and buildings of a modest city could be seen nestled up against the riverbank.

R3 gave a questioning warble. "No, I don't see anything, either," Obi-Wan said. "Let's see if we can get them to launch another attack." Taking a deep breath, he dropped the scout's nose downward, leveling out barely thirty meters above the ground and slowing to a crawl. Alternating his attention between the horizon and his sensor displays, he stretched out to the Force.

He felt a warning flicker and twisted the control rod hard. But it was too late. With a thunderous concussion and a screech of metal, the scout's starboard wing exploded, sending shrapnel careening off the cockpit canopy and sending him into a twisting drop toward the ground.

He pulled hard on the control rod, his free hand darting across the board as he tried to key in the emergency backup systems. But he was too close to the ground, and there simply wasn't enough time. A forest of tan-colored stalks shot up in front of him, and with a violent jolt the scout slammed hard into the ground.

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"What do you mean he went on ahead?" Anakin Skywalker demanded, glaring at Task Force Commander Fivvic as the tall Barabel stood beside the deck officer's desk. The deck officer, for his part, hunched diligently over his datapad and pretended he wasn't there. "Who told him he could do *that*?"

"Two points, Padawan Skywalker," the tall Barabel replied stiffly, and Anakin could sense the reflexive anger of his species stirring beneath the surface. Barabels were highly respectful of Jedi, pathologically so, in Anakin's opinion. But that respect didn't always translate to Jedi-in-training, particularly not when the Jedi-in-training was criticizing a full-fledged Jedi Knight. "One: As a command-rank officer, *General* Kenobi needs no one's permission to carry out his duties as he sees fit. Two: With you and yourwing of the survey team delayed, he thought his time would be best utilized by beginning the scouting."

Unfortunately, both points made sense. "Fine," Anakin conceded. "How soon can we go after him?"

Fivvic half turned to look at the scout ships scattered around the hangar deck, Anakin's Jedi starfighter off to one side looking like a strange cousin at a family picnic. "You took a beating out there," the Barabel said. "Some repairs can wait. Others must be made before we can leave."

Anakin took a deep breath, trying hard to cultivate the patience Obi-Wan was always on his case about. "How soon?"

"Three days. Possibly four."

Anakin felt his throat tighten as he watched the maintenance team moving purposefully among the damaged scouts. Three days. An eternity, particularly in the middle of a war.

Still, Obi-Wan was a Jedi Knight, and there were only rumors that the Separatists had moved into Dagro in the first place. There was a fair chance that the rumors were wrong and that Obi-Wan was wasting his time looking.

So why was Anakin getting an uncomfortable tingle up his spine?

"I presume," Fivvic went on with only a trace of sarcasm, "that four days will be acceptable?"

Gently, Anakin stroked his mechanical right hand. "Make it three," he said, "and you've got a deal."

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Slowly, Obi-Wan drifted back to consciousness, with a dark sense of disorientation and an even darker sense of urgency. Carefully, not moving, he eased his eyes open . . .

To find himself gazing into the faces of a young boy and an even younger girl.

"There," the girl said, rather smugly. "See? I told you he wasn't dead."

"Okay, fine," the boy grumped. "So he's not dead. Yet."

"Hopefully, not for a long time," Obi-Wan agreed, looking past the two children and trying to orient himself. He was half sitting, half lying in the middle of a patch of broken and flattened grain stalks, his back partially propped up against something hard and metallic. Off to his left he could see the crumpled nose of his scout and could smell the acrid scent of burning plastic. "Did you two get me out of my ship?" he asked the children.

"Dad did that," the boy said, still sounding a little miffed that he'd been wrong about Obi-Wan's condition. "He went to get the cart to get you out of here."

"A cart?" Carefully, Obi-Wan turned his head to look up over his shoulder, wincing at the twinges from his neck. He was leaning against the side of one of the harvesters he'd seen working the fields, one of the massive catches of the bin dumper sitting directly over his head. "Couldn't he have used this?"

"He could if he'd wanted to wreck all the sargeet between here and the house," the girl said with exaggerated patience. "Are you a soldier?"

"He's not a soldier, he's a Jedi," the boy put in before Obi-Wan could answer. "See? He's got a lightsaber."

Obi-Wan looked down to see the end of his lightsaber peeking out from inside his tunic. "Actually, I'm both," he told them, tucking the weapon back out of sight. Getting his hands beneath him, he started to push himself up.

And stifled a grunt of pain as agony shot through his right leg. "I don't think you ought to do that," the girl said. "Dad said you probably wouldn't be able to walk."

"Dad was right," Obi-Wan said, easing himself back onto the ground. "My name's Obi-Wan Kenobi. Who are you?"

"I'm Kit Swens," the boy identified. "This is my sister, Zizzy. This is our farm you crashed into."

"Sorry about that," Obi-Wan apologized, searching the sky within his field of view as he stretched out with the Force. There was no sign yet of a follow-up attack, but it could come at any time. "If we don't want to damage any more of it, we need to get me out of sight," he added, trying to look around the side of the harvester. "Arthree?"

There was no answer. "Dad said your droid looked dead," Kit offered.

Dead, or else gone dormant. Republic scout droids were designed to do that, if capture seemed inevitable, to try to keep the Separatists from pulling anything useful out of their databanks. "How does the rest of the ship look?" he asked.

"Pretty much the same." Kit craned his neck. "Here he comes."

Obi-Wan frowned, listening. No hum of repulsorlifts, but he thought he could hear rhythmic footsteps over the wind-rustle of the grain stalks. A moment later, a pair of slender lop-horned zeles appeared around the side of the harvester, harnessed together and pulling a wheeled wooden cart. A large bearded man sat on a bench seat at the front of the cart with a rein stick in his hand. He gave Obi-Wan an evaluating look as he brought the cart to a halt. "Awake, I see," he said. "How bad is it?"

"Nothing serious, but I will need transport," Obi-Wan told him. "And a place to hide."

"I can supply the first," the man said, setting the rein stick onto the seat beside him and jumping down to the ground. "I'm not so sure about the second."

"One's not going to do much good without the other," Obi-Wan pointed out as the man took his arm and pulled him upright. "The Separatist forces could be back at any minute to finish the job."

"Your best bet's going to be Vale City," the man said as he walked them to the cart, taking most of Obi-Wan's weight onto himself. "I can try to get you there."

"Is that the city way to the north?" Obi-Wan asked. "If so, we'll never make it that far."

"You rather hide in the fields?" the man countered. "That's about all there is between here and Vale."

"How about one of your outbuildings?" Obi-Wan suggested, nodding at the zeles. "In with your animals, maybe, where they'll help mask my lifeform readings."

"Forget it," the man grunted as he heaved Obi-Wan up over the side and into the back of the cart. "I'm not risking my family and farm for you. I'm sure not going to help you drag your war here to Dagro. Kit, Zizzy -- into the cart."

"Listen to me," Obi-Wan said quietly, propping himself up on one arm. "I was attacked by Trade Federation battle droids. Battle droids don't travel in small groups. That means the Separatists are here. If they're here, so is the war."

"Not if we don't let you fight them," the man said, giving his daughter a boost up onto the bench seat beside her brother and then climbing up himself. "And spare me the line about how the Republic wants to protect us from the forces of evil. Coruscant never paid a crippled droid's worth of attention to us before all this blew up." He picked up the rein stick and twitched it, and with a jerk the cart started forward. "We'll drop the kids at the house and head for Vale."

Obi-Wan looked at the sky. It was only noon, but even at the speed zeles could make, getting to the city would take the rest of the day and then some. "I don't suppose you have anything a little faster."

"Look around you," the other growled. "Seventy percent of our crop is sargheet. In case you hadn't noticed -- and you probably hadn't -- the bottom fell out of the sargheet market half a year ago." He gestured toward the zeles. "Stripe and Trotter eat crop stubble and excrete fertilizer. Landspeeders eat money and excrete debt."

"I understand," Obi-Wan said, grimacing. It was all too easy sometimes for a Jedi to forget what the life of the ordinary Republic citizen was like. "My apologies. My name's Obi-Wan Kenobi, by the way."

"Kirlan Swens," the man said reluctantly. "Jedi, right?"

"Yes."

"Figures."

Ten minutes later they reached the Swens homestead, an old but well-kept two-storey house beside a large barn and surrounded by a half dozen smaller storage sheds. Kirlan had pulled the cart up to the barn and the children were getting out when Obi-Wan finally heard the sound he'd been expecting ever since that sudden explosion had crippled his scout ship.

"STAPs," he said, glancing up at the sky. There was nothing in sight, which meant they were coming from the west, the direction currently blocked by the barn. "A lot of them."

"Blast it," Kirlan snarled under his breath, his eyes darting around the sky. "You kids -- get in the house. Tell your mother to play dumb. Come on, Jedi, move it."

With the harvester still out in the field, most of the barn's huge expanse was empty. "Over here," Kirlan grunted as he half carried Obi-Wan toward a large, escape-pod-sized object in the corner. A harvester's cab/engine module, Obi-Wan tentatively identified it. "I keep it for parts," Kirlan went on. "There should be enough room for you in the engine compartment. Can you get that ventilated access panel open?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, stretching out to the Force and pulling open the panel. The empty space behind it looked a little tight, but with a little squeezing it should do. Reaching up to the lip, he pulled himself up and inside, trying to keep his leg from banging against the side as he did so. Wriggling his way into a more or less comfortable position, he reached out with the Force and pulled the panel closed. "How does it look?" he called.

"Should work if you keep your mouth closed," Kirlan called back. "I'll bring the zeles in and tether them beside you. Don't budge until I come get you."

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It took the Separatist forces over an hour to make their way from the crash site to the Swens homestead. From the noises coming faintly through the ventilation grille, it sounded like the searchers started with the house, then moved to the smaller buildings, and finally came to the barn. There was the usual amount of clanging around, the usual mechanical orders and responses, and a single bad moment when one of the battle droids pulled himself up and actually pressed a photoreceptor against the grille.

Fortunately, Obi-Wan had had the foresight to spend most of his first hour stealthily unfastening a large radiator coil and propping it up in front of the grille. The droid saw what appeared to be a compartment full of machinery and hopped back down again.

A few minutes later, the whole squad trooped out of the barn. A few minutes after that, he heard the sounds of the STAPs lifting into the sky to continue the search.

And then, as he'd suspected it would, the real wait began.

It was after dark before Kirlan finally returned to the barn. "Jedi?" he called softly from below the access panel.

"Still here," Obi-Wan assured him, moving the camouflaging radiator coil out of the way. "Things quiet out there?"

"Quiet enough," the other grunted. There was a creak of metal, and Obi-Wan felt a rush of cool air as the panel was pulled open. "Come on -- we need to talk."

They crossed the empty floor of the barn and emerged into the night air. Obi-Wan had taken the time since the droids' departure to do a series of short healing trances, and although his leg wasn't completely healed it was good enough for him to walk without Kirlan's assistance. He could sense the farmer's surprise at that, but he made no comment.

It was as he led the way across the yard that Obi-Wan first sensed the other presences ahead of him in the house. "You have company?" he asked mildly.

Kirlan gave him a sideways look as he climbed the steps to the back porch. "I invited a few neighbors," he said. Pulling open the door, he gestured down a hallway stretching in front of them. "After you."

Stifling a grimace, Obi-Wan walked down the hallway. At the end, a large but homey conversation room opened off to the left.

And in the conversation room were Kirlan's guests. An entire packed room full of them.

"Hello," he said, stopping in the entryway and nodding to the group. There were men and women both, he saw, all with the hardened, sunburned skin that seemed to be the common look of farmers all across the galaxy. For their part, the people looked him over in silence, their emotions roiling with suspicion and fear. "I'm General Obi-Wan Kenobi of the army of the Republic."

A low murmur ran through the crowd, the mood darkening even further. "A general yet," someone muttered, and Obi-Wan silently berated himself for his thoughtlessness. The title, which had sounded so foreign to his ears when it had first been bestowed upon him, now rolled a little too easily off his tongue.

"I was right," one of the men growled, glaring accusingly at Obi-Wan.

"The war's here. And he's the one who brought it."

"Easy, Hanco," Kirlan cautioned.

"Easy, my foot," Hanco shot back, his eyes still on Obi-Wan. "Well, Jedi? You have an answer for that?"

"It depends on what you mean by 'the war,'" Obi-Wan said evenly. "If you mean the struggle for the Republic's survival, then the war is everywhere." He looked around the room. "If what you mean is battles and death and destruction, Dagro might still be able to avoid that."

"Why are you here?" a woman asked.

"We heard rumors that the Separatists had set up a presence on your world," Obi-Wan told her. "I came to see if the reports were true. Apparently, they were."

"Maybe; maybe not," Hanco countered. "We never saw anything like those battle droids until you showed up. Maybe they followed you in, hey?"

"Possible, but unlikely," Obi-Wan said. "And, actually, the fact that you haven't seen them before now is a good sign. That might mean they're still in the process of moving in and can hopefully be chased away with a minimum of trouble."

"Is that what you're going to do?" a youthful voice spoke up. Obi-Wan blinked as he focused for the first time on the far right of the room. Kit and Zizzy were sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of a seated woman, presumably their mother, both children gazing up at him with wide eyes. "Excuse me?"

"I *said*, Are you going to chase them away?" Zizzy repeated.

Obi-Wan glanced up at their mother's stony expression, then looked down at the children again. "Even a Jedi wouldn't be so bold as to tackle an enemy base by himself," he told them solemnly. "No, at this point all I'm planning is to wait for the rest of my survey team to come get me." There was a subtle but definite lowering of the tension in the room. Clearly, there had been some fear that he was here to draft them all into Republic military service. "So what do you want from us?" one of the men asked.

"Only that you don't betray me to the Separatists." Obi-Wan looked at Kirlan. "And perhaps that Kirlan will allow me to help around the farm."

Kirlan's eyes narrowed. "What kind of help?"

"Whatever needs doing," Obi-Wan said. "You told me that Coruscant never paid a crippled droid's worth of attention to you. Maybe I can make up a little for that neglect."

"You could start by raising the price of sargheet," someone suggested. A small but genuine ripple of laughter twittered around the room.

"I was thinking more along the lines of helping get the crops in," Obi-Wan said with a smile. They weren't opposed to the Republic, he realized now, or even to Obi-Wan himself. They were simply hardworking people who didn't want their lives made any harder than they already were.

"Actually, what I need most right now is someone to strip my crop stubble," Kirlan said. "I'll show you how in the morning. Everyone else, thanks for coming. And if something made of metal and carrying a blaster comes around asking questions, play dumb."

With a rustle of chairs and a low buzz of conversation, the crowd got to its feet and began to drift out, a few people lingering behind to talk to Kirlan or his wife. Obi-Wan stayed at the door, exchanging silent nods with the farmers as they filed past, until finally only he and the Swens family were left. "You must be Kirlan's wife," Obi-Wan said, stepping back into the room and nodding to the woman still seated with the children.

"I'm Trissa Swens," she confirmed, nodding back at him, her face marginally less stony but still unsmiling. "I wish I could say it was an honor to have you here, General Kenobi."

"But with Separatist forces hunting me, all you can see is the threat I pose to your family?" Obi-Wan suggested.

Kirlan took a step toward him. "Stay out of my wife's mind, Jedi," he warned.

"I wasn't in it," Obi-Wan said tiredly, a ripple of frustration and sadness pouring through him. "It's just that I've been fighting this war long enough to know how people react to me."

Trissa's lip twitched, and Obi-Wan caught her flicker of guilt. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean it to sound that way."

"No apology needed," Obi-Wan said, rubbing his temples. "Unless you've got other questions, though, I'd like to go back to the barn and get some sleep."

Trissa looked at her husband. "There's no need to go to the barn," Kirlan said, a bit gruffly. "We have plenty of room here in the house."

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said. "But tonight, at least, I'd rather stay outside. The droids might come back; and if there's going to be a fight I don't want it to be here in the house."

Kirlan's lips puckered. "I appreciate that," he said, a little grudgingly. "I'll bring you some blankets and a field mattress. Some food, too -- I guess you missed dinner." He looked Obi-Wan up and down.

"And I'd better get you some clothes," he added. "That outfit might blend in okay in town, but there's no way anyone out here would wear anything that flimsy."

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said again, taking a step down the hallway. "Good night, everyone. I'll see you in the morning."

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If the battle droids did indeed pass through the area again that night, they were considerate enough to be quiet about it. Obi-Wan slept soundly, not waking up until Kit arrived a little after sunrise to bring him in to breakfast.

The meal was quick but pleasant, with little of the underlying tension he'd sensed the evening before. Apparently, a good night's sleep -- perhaps, more importantly, an uneventful night's sleep -- had helped calm some of their fears.

After breakfast, Kirlan took Obi-Wan back to the barn to a huge stack of ten-centimeter-long grain stalks piled beside a bin made of wire mesh.

"Crop stubble," he identified it. "The lower sections of the sargeet stalks. By the time we've finished the harvest, we'll hopefully have enough of this to feed the zeles for the rest of the year."

He picked up one of the stalks and pointed at a dozen fine blue bristles attached to the base and sticking up about half the stalk's length. "But only if we pull these bristles off first," he went on. "If the animals eat them, they accumulate in their digestive systems and you end up with a dead animal."

Obi-Wan picked up a stalk and experimentally tugged at one of the bristles. It came off in his fingers with far less effort than he'd expected. "Yeah, they come off real easy," Kirlan agreed. "Which is why they'll come off in a zeles's gut, too. Anyway. That pail right there is for the bristles -- Trissa makes a nice soup stock out of them. The clean stubble goes into that wire bin. Got it?"

"Got it," Obi-Wan said, suppressing the reflexive urge to suggest that a droid might do the job more efficiently. Obviously it could. Just as obviously, Kirlan couldn't afford to buy one.

"Great," Kirlan said, moving toward the door. "The kids and I will be out in the fields all day, but Trissa will bring you some lunch when it's time."

"Will you be taking your lunch out with you?"

Kirlan hesitated. "I'll have something for the kids," he said. "Trissa and I usually don't bother with more than two meals a day."

Clearly another cost-cutting move. "Sounds very Jedi," Obi-Wan told him, keeping his voice casual. "Please tell her not to bother with any lunch for me either."

For a moment Kirlan's eyes seemed to search Obi-Wan's face. "In that case, I'll send the kids to bring you in when it's dinnertime," he said. "Have fun."

Rather to Obi-Wan's surprise, he did. It seemed sometimes like his whole life since the Battle of Geonosis had been nothing but combat, life-or-death decisions, and long days of hyperspace travel. To do work that was useful yet took little mental effort was a welcome change

of pace, soothing and satisfying. By the time Kit and Zizzy came to get him, he had the bucket half full of blue bristles and the kind of inner contentment and peace he usually got only from a period of Jedi meditation.

"How'd it go?" Kirlan asked as the children led their guest toward a large wooden table on one side of the kitchen.

"Very well," Obi-Wan told him. "I finished about a quarter of the pile."

Kirlan looked at the children with lifted eyebrows. "He did," Kit confirmed.

"I'm impressed," Kirlan said. "Actually, I'm ..." He hesitated, then gave a microscopic shrug. "To be honest, I'm surprised you were willing to take the job. It's usually the sort of work the children end up with."

"I was doing it before you got here," Zizzy said, crinkling her nose. "It gets pretty boring."

"Boring or not, there's nothing wrong with honest work," Obi-Wan told her.

"You wouldn't know it from some of the officials who've occasionally visited the valley," Trissa said scornfully from beside the stove.

"Particularly the women. They seem horrified that people actually live this way."

"I know a few officials like that myself," Obi-Wan agreed with a smile. "How'd the field work go?"

"We're getting there," Kirlan said, gesturing him toward one of the chairs at the table. "I've been trying to figure a way to sneak you out of here and up to the city. But those blasted battle droids have been zipping around overhead all day."

"Really," Obi-Wan said as he sat down. He hadn't heard any STAPs from the barn. "How high were they?"

"Pretty high," Kirlan said, sitting down at the head of the table. "You had to look close to tell they weren't birds."

"Did they ever come lower?"

"Not that I saw," Kirlan said. "You think they're worried about an attack from the ground?"

"Doesn't seem likely," Obi-Wan said, frowning. "All my long-range weapons are still with my scout ship. They've surely scooped up the wreckage and taken it away by now."

"Unless they think you're not the only one here," Kit suggested as he maneuvered a bowl of vegetables onto the table. "Maybe they think you're trying to sucker them into a trap."

"We can hope so," Obi-Wan told him. "There's nothing I'd like better right now than for them to keep their distance."

"When will your survey team arrive?" Trissa asked as she set a platter containing a small roasted avian in front of her husband.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "I don't know. My Padawan was held up bringing his part of the group, which is why I went on ahead."

"That wasn't very smart," Zizzy said primly as she set a glass of water beside Obi-Wan's plate. "Even I know better than to go to a strange place alone."

"I can't argue with you there," Obi-Wan said ruefully, taking a welcome sip of the water. "He was due in at the rendezvous yesterday, but from his report I know some of the ships had been damaged. Trouble is, I don't know how badly. It'll probably be several more days before they get here."

Kirlan hissed between his teeth. "That's a long time to keep someone hidden in a barn."

"At least, in the same barn," Obi-Wan agreed. "But if enough of your neighbors are willing to help, maybe I can barn-hop my way to Vale City."

"You mean like traveling to one homestead at a time?" Kit asked.

"Exactly," Obi-Wan said. "I'd go at night, maybe slung underneath one of your zeles to help disguise my infrared signature."

"Sounds risky," Kirlan rumbled. He picked up a knife and fork and started to carve the meat off the avian. "Not just for you, either."

"It couldn't hurt to ask them," Trissa said firmly, sitting down beside her husband.

"I suppose not," Kirlan said. "Probably not a good idea to use the comlinks, but I'll be seeing Pickers and Jurvi out in their fields tomorrow. I'll talk to them then."

* * *

Kirlan and the children returned the next evening with the news that Pickers and Jurvi were indeed willing, if not exactly enthusiastic. Trissa had made a thick and tangy stew for dinner, and as the Swenses ate they discussed plans for Obi-Wan's departure.

But for that night, at least, all their plans came to nothing. The battle droids resumed their patrols as the stars appeared overhead, dropping lower in the sky as if anticipating an escape attempt on the part of their quarry. Sitting in the barn listening to the sounds of the STAPs, Obi-Wan finally gave up and settled down to get some sleep.

He was up before sunrise the next morning and had already put in half an hour of work before Zizzy called him to breakfast. A quick meal and he was back at work, determined to trim the pile of crop stubble down to half its size before dinner. By the time the others returned he had very nearly achieved his goal, with a warm glow of victory that lasted only as long as it took Kit to back the zeles and cart up to the stack and unload the additional stubble they'd collected during the day.

They all ate dinner together, and Obi-Wan returned to the barn to prepare to leave. Once again, by midnight it was clear that the droids' vigilance would make that impossible, and he reluctantly returned to his field mattress to sleep.

It was on the fourth morning, just as he finished getting dressed, that the droids finally came.

* * *

With his ear pressed against a cracked panel in the barn wall, he listened intently to the telltale sound of five more STAPs coming to rest out in the yard. If he'd counted correctly, that made twelve on the ground, with twelve or thirteen more running high patrol overhead.

Twenty-five to one. Terrible odds, made even worse by the presence of civilians on the scene.

Especially when they were civilians he'd grown to consider friends. He stepped away from the wall and took a deep breath. "A Jedi knows only calm," he murmured to himself. Tucking his lightsaber inside the farmer's shirt Trissa had given him, he started toward the door.

He was nearly there when the panel was flung open and a battle droid strode inside. "You -- halt," he snapped, swiveling his blaster to point at Obi-Wan's chest.

"Hey, I didn't hurt anything," Obi-Wan said, holding up his hands in feigned surprise. "Really, I didn't."

The droid's head swiveled as he looked around the rest of the barn, then came back to gaze at Obi-Wan. "Come," he ordered.

The rest of the family was gathered together in a tight knot in the middle of the yard when Obi-Wan and his escort arrived, Kirlan with his arm tightly around Trissa's shoulders as she in turn pressed the two children close to her sides. Behind them, the house loomed dark and ominous against the pinks and reds of the sunrise coloring the sky behind it. Arrayed in a semicircle around them, a group of battle droids kept wary watch. "Ah," said a droid with officer markings as Obi-Wan was marched toward the group. "The other, as expected. You -- identify."

"Hey, I didn't take anything," Obi-Wan protested. "I just slept there, okay? That's all I did."

"Identify," the officer repeated, more sharply this time.

"I'm Marsh Fixter," Obi-Wan said. "I just -- look, I didn't take anything, okay? I just slept there."

To Obi-Wan's mild surprise, Kirlan caught the cue. "He's nothing but a rotten tramp," the farmer growled. "I must have kicked him off my land a dozen times."

"We shall see," the officer repeated.

Carefully, Obi-Wan stretched out with the Force, reaching to the droid's optical sensors and giving them a gentle vibration. His face was certainly in the enemy-agents listing that was undoubtedly now being transmitted to the officer, but fluttering the droid's vision should blur his image just enough to make a positive identification impossible.

Apparently, it worked. "No matter," the droid said with an electronic snort. "You are a liar. You have been working in the barn for two days. Otherwise, both children would not have been free to work the fields with their father."

Obi-Wan felt his throat tighten. So that was what the high-flying droids had been looking for: an anomaly in the farmers' normal routines. He should have thought of that.

"So you are a spy," the officer concluded. "Bring them all." Obi-Wan looked at the Swenses, standing silently gazing back at him. People who had fed and clothed him, who had risked their lives to help him. He could sense their fear, both for themselves and for him.

And then he focused on the children's faces and saw the trust and calm adding a sheen of hope to the fear in their eyes. He was a Jedi, one of those who claimed to be guardians of the people; and for all the cynicism of their elders, they still believed in him. Still believed that he could and would save them.

There was a flicker in the Force ... and suddenly he knew what he had to do.

"No," he said, taking a step forward as the droids started to close in on the family. "Leave them alone."

"Or?" the officer countered.

Smiling tightly, Obi-Wan lifted a hand, stretched out to the Force, and threw the droid backward to slam hard against the ground.

The yard exploded in instant consternation. Swiveling in unison, the entire group of droids turned its blasters away from the family and toward this sudden new threat.

But they were too late. Obi-Wan snatched out his lightsaber and with a snap-hiss ignited it, the glowing blue blade throwing shadows against the darkened house. He took a step toward the Swenses, then pretended to think better of it and began backing up again.

The droids reacted exactly as he'd hoped. Their circle shifted in response, tightening in toward him and bypassing the other four humans. Obi-Wan caught Kirlan's eye and gave a fractional nod; the other nodded back and began backing slowly toward the relative safety of the house, pulling his wife and children with him.

Overhead, the STAPs were closing in as well, tightening their part of the deadly ring around him. Obi-Wan kept backing up, shifting his lightsaber back and forth. If he could keep their full attention on him for just a few more seconds...

Abruptly, he heard the STAPs behind him twitch their drives to full power. A droid voice shouted a raspy warning --

And, like an avenging angel, a Jedi starfighter shot over the house out of the rising sun, its laser cannon spitting destruction as it tore through the middle of the STAP formation.

Obi-Wan was already in motion. He leaped to one edge of the droid circle, slashing with his lightsaber, then spinning around to deflect the blaster shots belatedly coming his direction from the more distant droids. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Swens family running full speed toward the house, safely out of the battle area. Overhead, the rest of the survey team shot past in the starfighter's wake, its laser cannon systematically dealing with the STAPs Anakin had missed.

Smiling grimly, Obi-Wan stretched out to the Force, settling his mind and body into Jedi combat mode.

Three minutes later, it was over.

* * *

"I've heard all the stories," Kirlan said, shaking his head in amazement as he fingered the steaming mug of misti in front of him. "But I'd never actually seen a Jedi in action."

"It was cool," Kit said with barely contained excitement. "Can you teach me how to do that?"

"Kit," Trissa said reprovingly as she set mugs in front of Obi-Wan and Anakin.

"Actually, I can't," Obi-Wan told him. "Not unless you were born with the ability."

His comlink beeped, and he pulled it out. "Yes?"

"All clear," Commander Fivvic's voice came. "We got most of the backups, except for a few who managed to escape into that big gorge to the east."

"So that's it?" Trissa asked.

"It is for now," Anakin told her. "We'll alert Coruscant that there's definitely a Separatist presence here, and when they can free up a task force they'll send it here to clear them out." He looked at Kit and Zizzy. "That is, if they don't give up and run away before that."

"But you'll be leaving?" Zizzy asked.

"No," Obi-Wan said. "Not just yet."

Anakin looked at him, and he could sense the Padawan's surprise. "Why not?"

"Because there's something wrong here," Obi-Wan said, trying to put his thoughts and impressions into words. "That droid commander said that they'd seen Kit and Zizzy in the fields when at least one of them should have been working on the crop stubble. But that kind of reasoning is way beyond combat droids. That means there must be some Neimoidians or other living beings here as well."

"Doesn't sound right for a small garrison," Anakin said, his voice suddenly thoughtful.

"It isn't," Obi-Wan agreed. "But it's exactly right for a research or development facility ... and my scout was taken out by an attack I didn't see coming."

"A new weapon," Anakin murmured, gazing out into space.

"Looks like it," Obi-Wan agreed. "And Fivvic said that the surviving droids just now fled into the gorge. How would they know there was enough room for them to fly in there unless they'd already checked it out?"

"That could be where their base is," Kirlan suggested. "Those cliffs go back ten kilometers. Plenty of room in there for any kind of facility they want."

"I agree," Obi-Wan said. "But when they first came searching for me, they didn't come from that direction. They came from the west. I remember that because the barn was blocking their view."

"That's right, they did," Kirlan murmured thoughtfully. "Huh."

"So what does that mean?" Kit asked.

"It means they took the time to circle way around so that no one would guess where their base was," Obi-Wan told him.

"But they just showed us where it is," Zizzy objected.

"Exactly," Obi-Wan said. "Which implies that whoever's in charge decided it didn't matter anymore if we knew. Which implies in turn that whatever they're doing in there is about finished."

He looked at Anakin. "Which implies that we'd better take a look while we still can."

"I don't know," Anakin said doubtfully. "The survey team's on a pretty tight schedule, and there aren't any attack teams anywhere in the sector."

"So we'll let the survey team go," Obi-Wan told him. "They can leave us your starfighter and one of the scout ships, and we'll rejoin them when we're done."

"Wait a second," Trissa put in, starting to sound alarmed. "You're the one who told us a Jedi couldn't take on a whole enemy base."

"I said a Jedi couldn't take on a base alone," Obi-Wan corrected, smiling tightly. "Now, there are two of us."

Kirlan shook his head. "Why," he said, "do I suddenly have a bad feeling about this?"